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SUBJECT: ICELAND: REINVIGORATING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY CULTURAL
AND SPORTS PROGRAMS

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11. Cultural programming is a key element of Embassy Reykjavik's public outreach, which aims to foster a positive image of the U.S. among Icelandic citizens and, especially, elites. Following is post's response to questions posed reftel:

- 1A. Which of your mission objectives benefits from cultural programs or could be better supported by cultural programs, including sports programs?

Potentially all of our mission objectives could benefit from cultural programs insofar as such programs provide opportunities for positive interactions with host nationals while offering an implicit reminder of the diversity and quality of American endeavor. Because Icelandic society is small (under 300,000 homogeneous people) and intimate (over half the population lives in the capital region, and the elites mostly attended the same three or four secondary schools followed by the University of Iceland), access is not ordinarily a problem for our diplomats. Nor do cultural programs assist in building direct public support for U.S. policy objectives, which in Iceland have mainly to do with defense and trade. They do, however, challenge and change negative public opinion or stereotypes that thwart U.S. interests. For example, in November we provided substantial funding for the opening of an exhibit at Reykjavik City Hall entitled "Gandhi, King, Ikeda; Peace for Future Generations," enabling the organizers to hire an African-American actor to perform Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The exhibit, running for two weeks and viewed by thousands of Icelanders, promoted non-violent activism not only as virtuous but also as an effective tool to realize social change. The performance challenged the contemporary stereotype of Americans as seeking to solve all problems militarily and as disrespectful of human and civil rights.

- 1B. What kind of specific cultural or sports programs or initiatives are, or would be, most effective in supporting those objectives?

As a small post (only 12 direct-hire Americans) with a small public diplomacy staff (three people) and budget (about \$40,000 annually for programs and grants), we do not have a lot of data on which to base conclusions about some types of programs working better than others. We can say, however, that we do not find poster shows helpful as we have no place to display them, and exhibitions and performing art shows are normally too expensive to fund in their entirety out of our regular budget. Our ideal event is to bring a musician (shared with another post or posts, to save us money) to perform in the Ambassador's Residence, inviting a mixed audience of artists, politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen for hors d'oeuvres, drinks, entertainment, and good cheer in the distinctively charming environment of the

CMR. Even sophisticated, worldly Icelanders act immensely flattered by an invitation to be the Chief of Mission's guests, and by all appearances they leave such events in a haze of warm feelings about transatlantic relations.

In theory we like videos because for the price of popcorn and soft drinks we can then invite student groups and young political activists to our embassy basement for a screening and discussion, thus creating good will while we educate. In practice, unfortunately, the videos we receive can seem too simplistic or propagandistic for Icelandic audiences, and we simply shelve them for fear that they could alienate rather than engage proposed guests.

What we tend to end up doing most often is in effect to stretch our budget by providing duty-free alcohol for receptions at exhibit openings and art festivals. Because alcohol is highly taxed in Iceland, our gifts of wine for receptions strike Icelanders as far more generous than they actually are. In return for these gifts we get thanked on invitations and publicity materials prepared by the event sponsors, and we get invitations for our staff to attend events along with high society. Then we use the events to hobnob, make connections, and talk up U.S. policy. An example is in August, when we provided the wine for a reception held in honor of Clint Eastwood, who was in Iceland to film part of his upcoming movie, "Flags of Our Fathers." The reception, held at an art museum, brought together American movie stars and staff with pillars of Iceland's art world. Our Charge d'Affaires was invited to make a short speech, which he used to highlight the breadth of U.S.-Icelandic bilateral cooperation.

In the year ahead, post would like to do more sports - or, to be specific, health and fitness - programming. One of

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the most popular children's TV shows in the U.S. is "Lazytown," a combination live action/computer-generated imagery show that encourages young kids to adopt healthy exercise and nutrition habits. The show is in fact the brainchild of an Icelandic auteur, produced in Reykjavik with a combined American/Icelandic cast. We would like to bring American athletes - e.g., members of the President's Council on Physical Fitness - to Iceland for a symposium on children's fitness that would provide an opportunity to thank Iceland for its contribution to the health of America's kids. Such a project would be helpful politically and strengthen cultural ties as well.

1C. What constraints does your mission face in effectively utilizing cultural, arts, and sports programs?

Iceland has a plethora of choirs, many of them excellent, so we have trouble getting our hosts excited about visiting singing groups. More generally, the cultural (for example, Iceland publishes more books per capita than any other country in the world besides Israel) and technological sophistication of Iceland requires that cultural programming be of extremely high quality in order to make an impact. And due to the small market and nine annual months of winter it can be hard to attract cultural programs of note or sports programs that require warm weather. Even when opportunities do arise, we need to be very picky, because even a relatively minor program like bringing an artist (say, through the Art in Embassies program) or musician to give a series of master classes can devour a staff member's time for days, stretching colleagues thin.

Of course the main constraint is fiscal, so Department support for notable cultural programming targeted specifically at small posts would be appreciated. Given the widespread concern about U.S. intentions regarding provision of Iceland's defense, as well as our genuine desire to strengthen the country's police, port and airport security, and Coast Guard, most of our small program and exchanges

budget supports programming addressing specific security issues. If we could afford additional cultural and sports programs, we could reach broader audiences on, frankly, more salubrious subjects.

¶D. How have you been able to partner with the private sector in your country to sponsor cultural/sports events, or to overcome resource (staff and funding constraints)?

Yes, we have. For example, in 2002 we partnered with a bank (which donated U.S. \$20,000) and the Reykjavik City Theater to bring New York's Merce Cunningham Dance Company for a series of what were critically-acclaimed, sold-out performances. Also, for several years we have partnered with Time4 Media to organize the Iceland Open. Starting around the Summer Solstice, the Iceland Open combines a 36-hole golf tournament (tee-off is at midnight) with sightseeing for about 300 golfers from around the world. This event brings significant revenue to the Icelandic economy as well as promotion of the country's tourism industry, thus creating goodwill in our Icelandic hosts.

¶2. Comment: Cultural and sports programming is particularly important at present, ironically at a time when the U.S. is using transformational diplomacy assertively to advance our political and economic values. We spend a lot of time trying to explain U.S. policies, for example, in the war on terror. But with many audiences - especially an Icelandic audience that has no personal experience of terrorism or war -- these days, no amount of explaining is going to win support or even sympathy for these policies. Sometimes it seems like the best we can do is distract people from policies they find repugnant with marvelous cultural and sports programming that focuses them on America's ongoing spectacular contribution to world heritage. End comment.

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